

World poses

Bollywood through the eyes of an Israeli photojournalist is the unlikely subject of Jonathan Torgovnik's new book

By Marlaïne Glicksman

"I sleep with it at the side of my bed each night," says Jonathan Torgovnik as he sits at a SoHo sidewalk café cradling a gold-wrapped bundle like a proud parent. Inside the bundle is a book, the first by the Israeli star photographer who learned his trade in the IDF and shot to fame with his searing pictures of the devastation of 9/11. But the subject of these 100 handprinted photos that represent the result of five years of labor are the streets of, not Gaza or New York, but Bollywood.

Bollywood Dreams (Phaidon Press, June 2003) is more than a homage to this largest and most colorful of dream factories; the 33-year-old's photo essay uncovers a fascinating mix of demigods and beggars, of celluloid glamour and shanty-town dreams.

Bollywood — as the Indian film industry (the world's largest) has been coined — was born in Bombay (Mumbai), but now encompasses centers in Calcutta, Madras (Chennai), and Hyderabad, producing over 800 films a year. But the term "Bollywood" also refers to a style of almost operatic filmmaking. Melodrama and musical extravaganzas sweeten moral lessons drawn from mythology, politics, and religion. Of course, there is romance, but sexuality is carefully encoded, in order to avoid the disapproval of censors in this highly conservative country.

With their mandatory five or six song-and-dance numbers, and running times approaching three hours, Bollywood films have often been written off as glorified kitsch in the West, but they are consumed seriously and joyfully, not only in India and its diaspora, but in Africa, the Arab countries, and the former Soviet states. You can

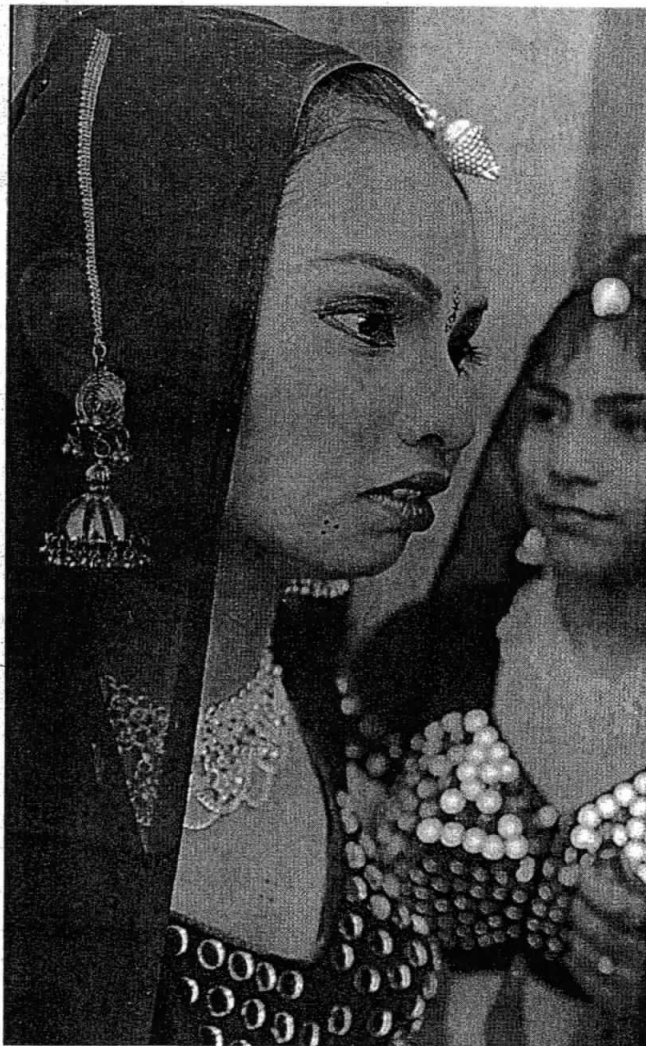
even catch these jamborees on Israeli TV.

In India, cinemas are plentiful, and lines of waiting patrons snake through the streets like sidewinders. Bollywood is embedded in the country's daily life and collective unconscious. Its 30-meter-high handpainted posters of actors tower next to those of Gandhi and the gods Shiva and Ganesh. Viewers are said to undergo a spiritual exchange with the actors onscreen. On the streets, people sport the latest Bollywood styles, and it's not uncommon for actors, many of them revered as demigods, to become politicians.

"In the book," says Torgovnik, "there's an image of Amitabh Bachchan, one of the biggest stars in India today. The caption notes that when he had a near-fatal accident, a fan walked 300 miles backward as a sacrifice for his fast recovery."

Bollywood is now catching on in the West, which is readily appropriating its fashion and music. *Lagaan*, a Bollywood bonanza, was nominated for a 2002 Oscar, and popular Western films such as Gurinder Chadha's *Bend Sin Like Beckham*, and Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding*, as well as Andrew Lloyd Weber's opera *Bombay Dreams*, draw on the genre, further whetting audiences' appetites.

To Torgovnik, however, Bollywood is not merely a trend but also a means to explore the Indian soul. At their strongest, the photographer's shots reveal the fine line between pageantry and poverty, entertainment and religion that constitutes Indian cinema's relationship with its people: A touring-cinema projectionist perches lotus-style between reels, rewinding film on a



Scenes from Bollywood

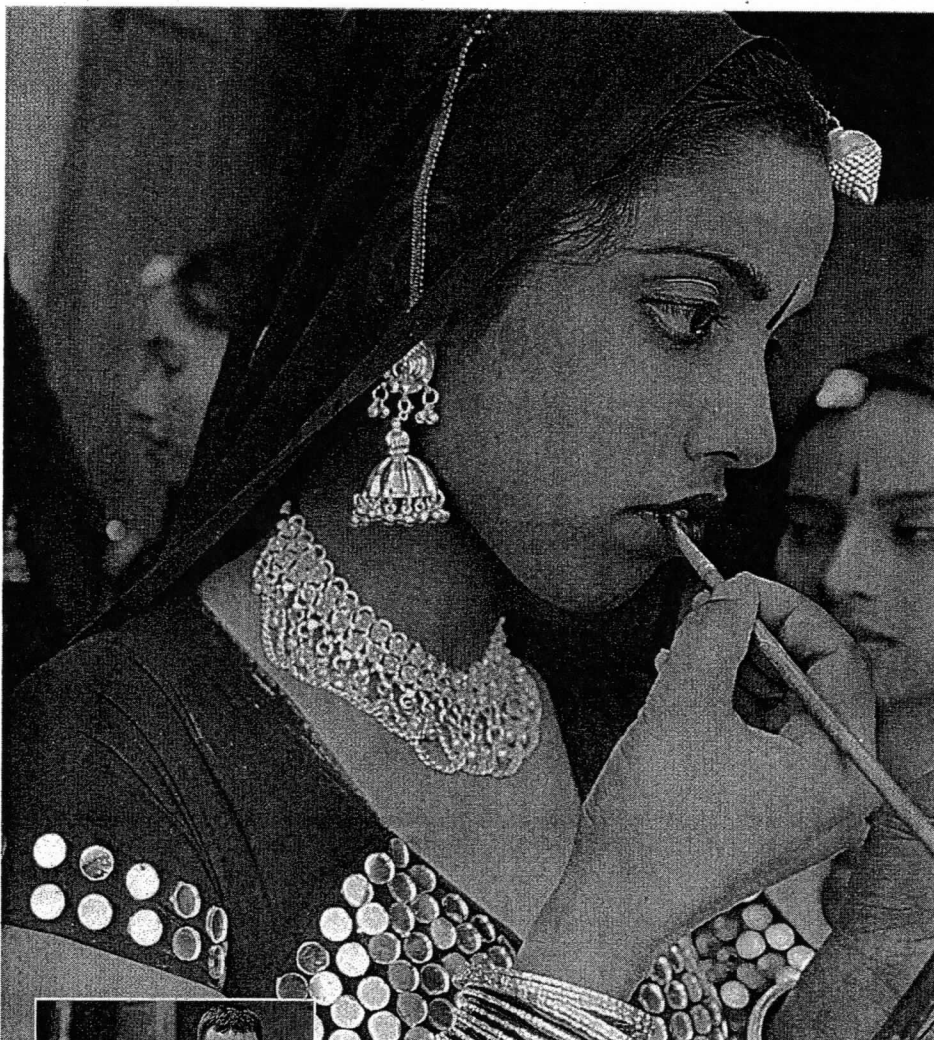
rocky riverbed; film audiences sit rapt with attention, men to the front, women to the back; a devotee listens deeply, eyes elsewhere, for the voice of the late actor and politician M.G. Ramachandran, said to emanate from his flower-strewn memorial.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER, who early in his career worked for *The Jerusalem Post* and now shoots for American and international publications including *Vanity Fair*, *Newsweek*, *Paris Match*, *Stern*, and the *London Sunday Times*, today lives in New York with his wife Tali.

Torgovnik's pictures, like the man himself, exude a deceptive, simple eloquence, and include portraits of the Buena Vista Social Club, Cuba's child boxers, celebrities, and New York's Lubavitch and Black Jewish congregations.

Torgovnik was raised in Tel Aviv. He began shooting in high school, when his Israeli father loaned him a Nikon for a class trip. His fellow students took snapshots of other kids; Torgovnik took pictures of abstract shapes and trees. With encouragement from his American mother, a museum curator, Torgovnik pursued the medium more seriously, and joined the IDF as a photographer.

Describing this in-the-field immersion, Torgovnik says: "It was a kind of self-taught school of photography. My job was to accompany the different military units and document their activity. I started my service in 1987, just when the first intifada started. I



Photographer Jonathan Torgovnik

spent a lot of time in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon. So I was put in very intense situations at a very young age."

After the IDF, Torgovnik, like many young Israelis, backpacked through Asia, where he became exposed to Bollywood and was captured by its incredible influence. The idea of documenting the phenomenon lodged in his mind, but first New York beckoned. It was where his mother was born and his father had studied, and anyway, this was the center of the photographers' universe.

He went on to study at the School of Visual Arts, which not only gave him a partial scholarship, but also exempted him from two years of basic photo courses in recognition of his IDF work.

"I came at the age of 21 with a portfolio they're not used to seeing from the kids who come there," explains Torgovnik. He also became an assistant to French photographer Frederic Brenner, who has been documenting Jewish communities throughout the world for the past 20 years.

"His way of working is very intense, very thought out. His photographs are always of real people in real locations, but they're very deep in terms of what he's trying to transmit. The experience with Frederic was really instrumental in developing my style and who I am today in documentary photography, and gave me a lot of tools for this Bollywood project."

After graduating from SVA, Torgovnik was selected for the highly competitive Eddie Adams Photojournalism Workshop – an intense weekend shoot with top photo editors and photographers. At its end he won a \$2,000 cash award from Kodak. He took the money, returned to India, and his Bollywood dreams gradually became reality.

BETWEEN Bollywood trips – four altogether – Torgovnik soared to recognition with his coverage of 9/11.

"Honestly, I didn't feel as though I 'soared to recognition,'" he replies when I mention this. "But I covered this event. It was one of the most horrific of my life."

He had just returned from France and woke up to see the second plane hit the World Trade Center.

"I had this immediate need to document it," he says. "It was just an instinct, maybe from my military work. As a journalist, there wasn't even a doubt: I grabbed my camera, my film, and took my bicycle down there. But the interesting thing is that this intense feeling was actually related to Israel and the first Gulf War: this feeling of vulnerability in your home."

"Just before I left for my first trip to India, the Gulf War started and Scud missiles came to Tel Aviv. I'll never forget sitting at home with my parents, my sister, and my grandmother, putting on these gas masks in this stupid sealed room that probably wasn't even effective if there was a chemical attack, and being terrified. Suddenly it's in your backyard, it's in your home, it's with your parents, and you're not a soldier, you're not in uniform, you're not a tough boy – all the emotions come out, and there's no mechanism to really filter it."

"I felt similarly with 9/11: It's in your backyard, and you can't do anything about it. There are these planes coming, and you don't know if there will be more or where the next one will hit."

He was right there when the second tower fell.

"I took two or three pictures before I realized that this huge thing was falling. It was really the first time in my life that I felt I was going to die. And I said, Run! I felt that I could win an Olympic medal for that run."

Newsday published the resulting work in three double-page spreads, putting the photographer in the spotlight and then on extended assignment. His most iconic image, of a dust-covered, debris-strewn office cubicle with its windows blown out and the wreckage of the towers visible, was made early the next morning. For anyone who's held an office job, the scene was too chillingly familiar. It was published in double-spreads worldwide.

WHEN I NEXT meet Torgovnik a couple of weeks later, his papa's glow has given way, and he's slightly wired – not unlike the father of a newborn kept awake one too many nights. He's just returned from opening a Bollywood exhibition in Prague, has been giving back-to-back interviews for the book's publication, is prepping for shows in LA and New York, as well as in Spain and France, and is shooting on assignment in between. Not to mention that his cell-phone has been ringing nonstop.

But though Bollywood and Torgovnik's work seem to have caught on around the globe, the reception in Israel has been subdued.

"I went to a few meetings with curators, and the response I got from them was, 'Oh, but no one knows about Bollywood here.' So they don't think it would be interesting for them to show it. In the rest of the world, the response is the opposite: The whole idea of documentary projects is to work on things that people don't know much about, to make them aware."

"It's my dream to have a major exhibit in Israel – it's where I come from and feel close to. I'm just a bit surprised and a little disappointed about the attitude – the lack of understanding that you don't need to show Israelis art by Israelis related only to Israel or Jews. I think it's embarrassing; they underestimate the population of Israel."

Still, Torgovnik has undertaken an Israeli project, on reserve soldiers, that he hopes to complete this summer.

"Last year when I was at this photojournalism festival in Perpignan, it was so anti-Israeli and anti-American. I felt people there just hate us. There's this misconception that Israeli soldiers' mission in life is to kill Palestinians. And I want to break that image."

His idea is to shoot diptychs: 10 portraits of reserve combat soldiers in full regalia side by side with shots of them in civilian life, at their jobs.

"Guys who are Sephardic, Ethiopian, Ashkenazi, as well as from different walks of life – a doctor, a taxi driver, a settler who lives in Kiryat Arba, in Hebron," explains Torgovnik. "I thought this would put a more human face on the Israeli citizen. That we're not monsters. I think Israel is suffering a public relations war because it is trying to be human – not because of the opposite, as it is portrayed."

Will he include Palestinians among his portraits?

"Many people have suggested that I show the Palestinian side. Is there a soldier in the Palestinian Authority? I'm very leftist in my views. Yet as much as I believe that they have a just cause and deserve a country, and that we need to give back their land, I don't like them. And I don't blame them for not liking Israel. But I don't think they're playing a fair game. Like Abba Eban said, they never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. And they do this time and again, every day."

Interestingly, Indian film, as Torgovnik points out and *Bollywood Dreams* celebrates, manages to transcend such conflicts. In a country where there are now a lot of problems between Hindus and Muslims, there's no such issue in cinema. There's the "Kahn gang": Shah Rukh Kahn, Salman Kahn, Aamir Kahn – all superstars in Bollywood, and all Muslims.

"Religion disappears, disintegrates. As much as it deals in politics, deals in issues, the beautiful thing is that Bollywood is really a uniting element."